DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 279 263 HE 020 098

AUTHOR Dill, Gary A.
TITLE Do You Hear What I Hear? A Response to Faculty Perceptions.
PUB DATE 13 Dec 85
NOTE 13p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Environment; College Faculty; *Faculty College Relationship; *Faculty Workload; Higher Education; Incentives; Interprofessional Relationship; Labor Market; Rewards; Teacher Administrator Relationship; *Teacher Attitudes; *Teacher Morale; Teacher Responsibility; Teacher Salaries; Teacher Supply and Demand; *Work Environment
IDENTIFIERS *Southwest Texas State University

ABSTRACT

Causes of morale problems among faculty at Southwest Texas State University are discussed, along with suggestions to improve conditions. Causes include: real income decline, a deteriorating work environment, an inhospitable academic labor market, increasing disciplinary isolation and inequity, a demanding teaching load, high research demands, lack of trust in the college administration, and a perception by faculty that the university does not have high prestige. Suggestions include: while large salary increases may be impossible, rewards might be provided, including increased travel budgets, as well as work-study students to provide clerical support; care should be exercised in the use of the academic labor market as a resource for achieving compliance or assuming a sense of security about availability of replacement staff; exploring creative ways for fostering cross disciplinary dialogue and increasing a sense of mutual professionalism among the faculty; reticence by faculty members to do research or some other activity should not be seen as lack of commitment but perhaps lack of time; and care should be taken to nurture communication lines between faculty and administrators. (SW)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 279 263

DO YOU HEAR WHAT I HEAR? -- A RESPONSE TO FACULTY PERCEPTIONS

by Gary A. Dill
Southwest Texas State University
December 13, 1985

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Gary A. Dill

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

HE 020 078

DO YOU HEAR WHAT I HEAR? -- A RESPONSE TO FACULTY PERCEPTION

In my discussions with faculty members, the College of General Studies functioned as a focus and a rallying point for the expression of feelings and perceptions about issues that exist at Southwest Texas State University but are not explicitly related to general education. While all of the frustrations communicated were verbalized in the context of General Studies, none applied exclusively to the College's establishment. Indeed, by an overwhelming number of standards, the administrative structure, curricular content, and decision making apparatus in the College of General Studies are worthy of commendation. Yet, in spite of that, the perceptions of the faculty with whom I spoke remain negative. It was my intent to fairly capture the essence of that negativism and place it squarely in the context of the coming implementation of the General Studies curriculum next fall.

During the process of preparing the written report of my study, "Faculty Perceptions of General Studies: A Case Analysis," I solicited feedback from each of the people with whom I interviewed. Many of these faculty members thanked me for carefully and faithfully representing their perspective in my report. The notes and spoken words of gratitude often contained explicit or implicit postscripts inquiring about what "real" utility or effect the report would have. The invitation extended to me by Vice President Gratz, Dean Newsom, and Associate Dean Johnson to reflect further about my research represents one way in

which the findings of the study can find practical utility.

Not all of the responses to my study have been accolades. In fact, four administrators and faculty who read the report's draft felt that its tone regarding faculty morale was either unnecessarily alarmist or inappropriately apocalyptic. Consequently, when given the invitation to examine further my findings, I have been particularly sensitive to testing my reading of the faculty members with whom I spoke with the impressions of faculty members elsewhere. As I have examined the issue, I have sought information about the morale of faculty in general and about the morale of faculty in institutions like Southwest in particular. My observations about the faculty I interviewed is apparently consistent with other findings. In a study supported by the Carnegie Corporation, Ford Foundation, and the Exxon Educational Foundation, Jack H. Schuster and Howard R. Bowen visited thirty-eight diverse colleges and universities and conducted 532 interviews with "rank-and-file" faculty members and academic administrators. "At about a third of the campuses we visited we found faculty morale to be good. . . . In contrast, at two-thirds of the campuses we visited faculty morale seemed to be no better than fair and at a quarter of the campuses we characterized morale as 'very poor.' Our best overall characterization of faculty morale is 'shaky.'"

Before attempting to arrive at some suggestions for addressing the issue of low faculty morale at Southwest Texas, it

is necessary to delineate some of its causes generally.

1. Real Income Decline

Between the years 1970 and 1983, faculty earnings declined at a faster and steeper rate than any other major non-agricultural occupational group. Even after adjusting for inflation, this decline amounts to a staggering twenty percent! Although the past two years have seen a slight recovery, only about four percentage points of a rebound has been realized. (Schuster, 1985)

2. A Deteriorating Work Environment

Although this deterioration is not as easy to document dramatically as the income reduction, the erosion of the work environment is none-the-less plainly evident in such facets as diminishing clerical support, increasingly obsolete instrumentation, negligible travel budgets, and poorly prepared students. Since the "academic work environment" is one of the "perks" that attracted many academics to the professoriate, this decline has been particularly frustrating.

3. An Inhospitable Academic Labor Market

The well documented paucity of teaching positions relative to the number of available potential aspirants is staggering. Consequently, with relatively few job openings in most academic fields, a frustrated or dissatisfied faculty member finds himself or herself depressed by a perception of functional incarceration by a position that is at best minimally fulfilling.

4. Increasing Disciplinary Isolation and Inequity

The academic labor market is not equally inhospitable to all of the professions. Faculty members are well aware that members of some disciplines are paid at substantial rates because of their market place demand. In particular, humanities faculty members are in substantially poorer light than are faculty members in the professions. "One humanist complained, 'The market has become the arbiter. There's been an erosion of the notion that people should be supported at a reasonable level for scholarship not directly useful to the market. . . I'm not sure I want to know what an assistant professor of economics is making. I suppose we're more afraid of the humiliation.'" (Schuster, 1985) Gouldner's typology of Cosmopolitan and Local applies well to the University faculty community. Faculty members are increasingly identifying with a cosmopolitan reference group that extends beyond the campus. With the positive external identity comes an attendant internal resentment bordering on hostility toward those outside one's general disciplinary bounds.

5. A Particularly Demanding Teaching Load

The standard twelve hour teaching load is undergraduate centered, carries a very high student/faculty ratio, and requires a substantial investment in out-of-class time -- an investment so formidable that research becomes an avocational burden in many cases rather than a crucial part of the way a professional spends his or her working hours.

6. Research Demands Remain High Regardless Of Other Circumstances

Promotion, advancement, and tenure criteria rely heavily on research productivity. Additionally, the mostly intangible drive of many compentent teachers would make research a high priority at any rate.

7. The Confidence Factor

The most crucial intangible variable is whether faculty members trust "the administration" to be friend or foe. At SWT, the faculty members I interviewed spoke of their perception of the administration-faculty relationship as being just short of adversarial. Consequently, even though the rhetoric spoken and the structures developed by "the administration" might be both eloquent and logistically sound, the result is a lack of trust. When the faculty does not "trust" the administration, the effect is disastrous. Even when something is indeed done in the best interest of faculty members and the apparatus calls for a high degree of faculty involvement, the lack of trust breeds suspicion of motive and the total effect yields decreasing morale.

8. The "Prestige" Factor

Southwest Texas, like many other former teachers colleges, is perceived as "somewhere midstream between that blighted shore [of normal school status] and the promised land of [first-rate] university status."(Clark) Some say that the university is currently in the middle of resolving an identity crisis of sorts, suffering from a tenacious self perception of inferiority and second class status. Such an identity dilemma dramatically affects

the faculty's self perceptions.

If the foregoing are indeed "causes" of low faculty morale, how can they be addressed? Certainly, it would be unproductively simplistic to pretend that easy solutions exist. On the contrary, one may function best to clearly identify the problems and commission someone else for a solution quest. Consequently, the following enumeration of suggestions is intended to be food for thought. The suggestions are not intended as an antidote for a creeping virus, nor are they formulated as condescending platitudes by a deluded external observor who is convinced that he has made earthshaking and pioneering discoveries. Rather, the suggestions are offered in an effort to render a reading from a vantage not always accessible to those already hard at work within an institution.

A further contextual word is in order. A recent study of faculty satisfaction concluded that of all of the "satisfiers" in being a faculty member in a Public Comprehensive University, a favorable impression of the administration ranks highest, at least twice as influential as any other factor. (Asmussen) This possibly surprising conclusion explicitly contends that every other satisfaction factor ultimately loads heavily on whether a faculty member feels that the administration is "competent, able, and energetic, . . . will not give in to outside pressure against the wishes of the faculty, . . . communicates well . . . understands faculty needs . . . [and] is progressive concerning

faculty welfare." Such factors as salary, work environment and teaching load satisfaction tend not to have much relative influence, even though they are frequently mentioned first in a list of dissatisfiers. It is in the context of this contention that the following suggestions are offered.

1. To address the financial issue is crucial. Raising salaries may be impossible and even outside the power of a particular administrator. Yet, this issue, frequently the subject of coffee cup conversation and hallway complaining, is an almost everpresent sub-surface agenda item. An "understanding" administrator could at least show evidence of concern and an awareness of inequities.

2. Sensitivity to low cost or even non-financial perks that can add to the quality of the work environment might be a resource for a faculty member's cultivation of the impression of administrative concern. These might include such support amenities as modestly increased travel budgets and conference registration stipends as well as assertively seeking out work-study students who could offer further supportive clerical assistance to faculty.

3. Care should be excercised in the use of the academic labor market -- currently generally inhospitable to faculty -- as a resource for achieving compliance or assuming a sense of security about the availability of replacement personnel. Further, administrators should maintain a sufficiently careful memory as to remind themselves that only two decades ago, a shortage rather

than a surplus in the faculty job market was the reality. It is conceivable that today's windfall could be reversed in the foreseeable future.

4. It will be helpful to explore creative possibilities for fostering cross disciplinary dialogue and increasing a sense of mutual professionalism on the campus among the faculty. Increasing disciplinary isolationism can undercut a lot of administrative good will.

5. The issues of teaching work load, committee assignments, increased student advising responsibilities, and research demands should be seen as separate facets of a unified concern. All of these individual components impinge on the unitary factor of a fixed and limited amount of available time. Therefore, although a faculty member is committed to teaching the required load, wants to be involved in institutional decision making at the committee level, desires to participate in advising students who seek counsel either about a major to declare or about courses to take in a declared major, and wants to engage in research of high quality, all of this involvement demands severely limited time. Reticence to do any of these things should not be read as a lack of commitment. Particularly, complaints from faculty members about the pressure to do research merit careful response. It is a common, valid assumption that involvement in research is in a faculty member's best interest. Tenure and promotion procedures, personal and professional fulfillment, and academic and vocational

integrity support such an assumption. Therefore, the encouragement to do research should be used as an opportunity for faculty affirmation by the administration, not as a weapon to force compliance. Even if only occasionally, compensatory reduced time should be allowed for research pursuits. If it is patently impossible to allow for more time to do research, a concerned administrator will at least acknowledge the reality and burden of the heavy work load and not minimize the demands inherent in it.

6. In the university's -- or an individual administrator's -- quest for increasing prestige, the faculty should be recognized as a primary asset. If the faulty's past work and contributions are degraded, demeaned, or even denigrated by an upper level administrator's carelessly chosen public rhetoric -- even when talking about efforts for creative curricular reform -- then the faculty self perception is needlessly imperiled. Practical diplomacy in public and in-house rhetoric will go a long way fostering the faculty's healthy self concept and consequently the way the institution perceives of itself.

Addressing the issue of trust requires less prescriptive mechanical action and more careful affective attention. Care can be taken to nurture other-than-bureaucratic communication lines. Fostering a sense of mutuality can be accomplished by an administrator who goes to a faculty member's "turf" for some contact. An action as simple as scheduling a meeting in a faculty member's office instead of in an administrator's office could have

immediate positive effects. Initiating and fostering dialogue in less than formal settings with some faculty members could have a subsequential effect in making a positive impact on other faculty members. Referring to the faculty senate agenda items that require recognizably consequential action will increase a sense of mutuality and consequently mutual trust. Many of these reflective suggestions are possibly already in place. However, the results of my study indicate that the faculty with whom I interviewed do not perceive them as present.

It is likely that an examination of faculty perception of any administratively supported high-profile innovative program at Southwest Texas State University would have yielded the same results as did the implementation of the General Studies Curriculum. It would be most inaccurate to assume either that the issues raised should or could be adequately resolved by modifications in the administrative structure, curricular content, or decision making apparatus in the College of General Studies. However, General Studies may provide a functional forum for beginning to define and address the issues that are emerging.

REFERENCES

Asmussen, Christopher. "College Faculty Satisfaction and Institutional Identification." A Paper presented to the American Educational Research Association's Annual Conference, April 15, 1983. (ERIC ED 235 750)

The Carnagie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. "The Faculty: Deeply Troubled." Change, Volume 17, Number 5, September/October 1985.

Clark, Burton R. "Listening to the Professoriate." Change, Volume 17, Number 5, September/October 1985.

Gaff, Jerry G. General Education Today. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. 1983.

Jedamus, Paul, Marvin W. Peterson and Associates. Improving Academic Management. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. 1980.

Keller, Phyllis. Getting at the Core: Curricular Reform at Harvard. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press. 1983.

Kerr, Clark. The Uses of the University with a Postscript--1972. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press. 1972.

Schuster, Jack H. and Howard R. Bowen. American Professors: A National Resource Imperiled. New York: Oxford University Press. 1986. (to be published)

Schuster, Jack H. and Howard R. Bowen. "The Faculty at Risk." Change, Volume 17, Number 5, September/October 1985.

Wolotkiewicz, Rita. College Administrator's Handbook. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc. 1980.